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SHAKESPEARE—
AND THAT CRUSH



SHAKESPEARE— AND THAT CRUSH

Being Angela's Guide to English Literature

By RICHARD DARK

With Illustrations by THOMAS DERRICK

BASIL BLACKWELL · OXFORD

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PREFACE TO THE SIXTH EDITION

THE author confesses himself not a little pained by the spirit in which this work has been received. Most people (Heaven forgive them!) appear to regard it as a humorous production. The primary object of the book, on the contrary, is to stimulate and instruct, it is meant to serve as a guide to schoolboys and schoolgirls, to university students of science, engineering and kindred subjects, to average-adjusters, to house- and estate-agents, to Scottish W S's, to stockbrokers of all denominations—in brief, to everyone whose soul specially needs awakening to the—er—glories of our literary heritage.

One other word. Several indignant Oxford dons (by the way, see 'dons' in the Index) have written to complain that on page 34 of the first three editions Xenophon is spelt with a Z. For this ghastly mistake, due either to his own carelessness or to that of some devil of a printer (probably the latter), the author apologizes. Otherwise, the book may be classed as correct, copper-bottomed and A 1 at Lloyd's.

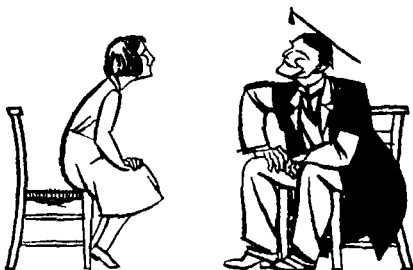
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To K G C.
WHO
ALWAYS SMILED
IN THE RIGHT PLACE

RANGE-FINDER



Let us get into touch with each other Angela

LET us get into touch with each other, Angela. We wonder whether it has ever occurred to you to ask yourself why you should study English Literature. The practical value of most of the subjects taught at school is pretty self-evident. For instance, there is arithmetic. Think. The schoolgirl of to-day will be the flapper of to-morrow and, with a bit of luck or management, the matron of the week after next. In this capacity she will be entrusted with the spending of the



She sets out about 10.30

greater part of her husband's income Will she falter in the task? She will not Thanks to the lessons learned from the successors of Bishop Colenso, she will feel the utmost confidence in dealing with any and every crisis that can possibly confront the young housewife in the discharge of this pleasant duty. Let us follow her during a typical morning's shopping Armed with 'a certain sum of money', she sets out about 10.30 with the intention of purchasing 5 pianos, 3 mutton chops, and a soup-strainer, for which her husband (a symmetrically-minded man) has requested her to pay with an equal number of pound notes, half-crowns and threepenny bits The cost of the chops, however, proves to be 1s 9½d,



A symmetrically minded man



Rapid calculation

and her mathematical training enables her to perceive almost at once that the feat Henry has asked her to accomplish is impossible. Without a moment's hesitation she

decides to spend the whole of the money on eggs. On inquiring their price, she is informed by the grocer

that it is such that if she got 32 eggs less than she actually will get for every 7s she spends it would be raised by 2d a dozen. By a second rapid calculation



Post Office

she finds that the eggs cost £16 5s a hundred and rightly regarding this price as excessive, she leaves the grocer's and proceeds to the post office, where she finally invests her capital in Government securities

which at 5 per cent will yield her in 4 years' time a profit of £27 13s 4d (Find the amount she started with after making a reasonable allowance for tram fares and a cup of coffee)

Or take science. As the day draws to a close, Mrs Henry is walking in her garden when she spies a small, malignant face protruding from the ground at the foot of her favourite lettuce plant. It is that of the detested slug. At once she dashes back,



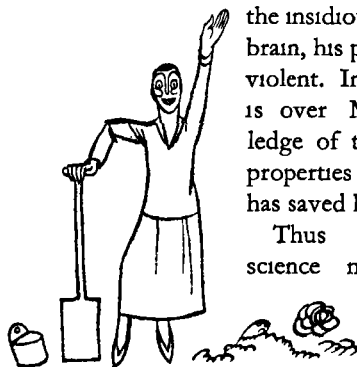
A small, malignant face

first to the tool-shed and next to the larder, and quickly returns with a spade and a supply of sodium chloride, more widely known,

perhaps, as common salt The foe has disappeared, but she has marked his lair and a single thrust of her spade brings him to the surface. He glares horribly at her and gnashes his jaws. For a moment her courage fails, then with a rapid encircling movement she gets in his rear and after one or two preliminary feints succeeds in depositing some of her ammunition on his tail. Convulsions shake the slug He thrashes wildly about, tearing up the soil for several inches around and bubbling with baffled fury But gradually, as the insidious poison reaches his brain, his paroxysms grow less violent. In a few minutes all is over Mrs Henry's knowledge of the slug-slaughtering properties of sodium chloride has saved her salad



Returns with a spade



All is over

Thus mathematics and science may be considered to have a definite bearing on a girl's subsequent activities The same can

be said, with certain reservations, of geography That Hollywood is the capital of the U.S.A., that the

chief exports of Ireland are sweepstake-tickets and Clydesiders, that Canterbury, whence the best Scotch mutton so often hails, is not in Kent but in New Zealand—these are facts that should be at every woman's finger-tips. Even history may be useful. The girl who leaves school with a really sound knowledge of the dates of all the English sove-



*Knock historical spots off many
an Oxford Don*

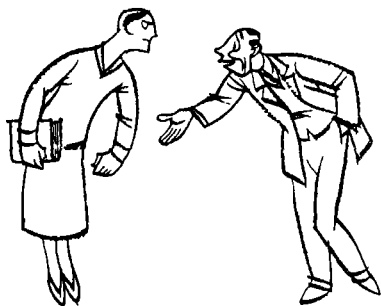
reigns from Egbert onwards and the names and addresses of the wives of Henry VIII, will at any rate have the satisfaction (whatever it may be worth) of realizing that she can knock historical spots off many an Oxford

don, and this may possibly tend to increase her self-respect.

French and German, of course, speak for themselves, or should do, if properly taught.

But what are we to say about English literature? Reflect. Will its study enable you, Angela, to become a more efficient housewife or to command a higher salary as a typist and shorthand-writer? We doubt it. On the contrary, some portions of it may prove positively harmful. How often has a girl's spelling been ruined by her reading of Chaucer! How frequently

have her flirtations with Carlyle merely served to deepen her contempt for English grammar! Has English literature, then, no value? It has, indeed, and a very great one—the value of absolute uselessness for all bread-and-butter purposes. It is a means to nothing, but just an end in itself. For this reason alone it stands above every other subject of the treadmill, because it



Some Idiot

is the only one that will help you to get your eye off the eternal main chance and thus to save your soul. So the next time some idiot raises the usual maddening objection, 'Yes, but what's the *good* of

it?' all you need say is, 'It's no good, and that's why I like it.'

Very well. Now a word about this little book. One of the drawbacks of our literature is that there is so much of it that you cannot hope to study more than parts of it in any detail. Nevertheless, you want a general framework into which to fit your special authors, otherwise you won't view them in proper perspective. This framework we have endeavoured to give you. Whether it will help you to pass your school certificate examination we do not know, but we can

confidently assert that, like the peach melba, it is, if a trifle flimsy in its upper layers, completely sound in the fundamentals.



I

EARLY DAYS



WE cannot say, Angela, exactly when English literature proper began, nor, unfortunately, can we predict when, if ever, it will end. It is pleasant, however, to be able to state with some certainty that both the Ancient Britons and the early Anglo-Saxons



Hunting or being hunted

were distinctly non-literary folk. The Ancient Britons spent most of their spare time in eating heavy meals and hunting or being hunted by large animals. The Anglo-Saxons, after exterminating the Ancient Britons with care and thoroughness, settled down in isolated village communities as far away from one another as they could, which, considering the kind of people they were, was a very natural thing to do. Here they just stuck to ploughing their farms and beating their wives



Beating their wives like sensible men

like sensible men. The only culture they cared for was agriculture, as for literature, its name was mud. It is true that at the time of their descent on the island one wretched high-brow managed to smuggle through the customs a poem with the pretty name of *Beowulf*, which has very annoyingly been preserved to us

almost entire, but that is really all we have against the early Anglo-Saxons

After a while, though, the progress of civilization brought its inevitable consequences and a certain



Practised by the Monks

amount of literature crept into the country At first this was merely Latin, imported from the Continent and (together with celibacy) practised by the monks in the seclusion of the cloister, and it did little harm, because nobody else understood it Indeed, the rest

of the Anglo-Saxons, realizing that the monks, having no wives to beat, must often find time hang rather heavily on their hands, were quite pleased to allow them this alternative amusement, the only stipulation they made was that no one on any pretext whatever should attempt to teach *them* Latin grammar And then one day, suddenly and



A man called Caedmon burst into poetry

without the slightest warning,

a man called Caedmon burst into poetry in the native language

What was to be done? Well, of course, the simplest thing would have been to put him quietly away with a hatchet, and if only some firm step like this had been taken, much subsequent suffering might have been averted, since it would almost certainly have discouraged the output of literature. Unluckily, in Caedmon's case the attack of poetry took a religious form, and the Anglo-Saxons, who were a superstitious crowd, let him get away with it. It was a fatal mistake. Before long another fellow started—in prose this time—and never stopped till he had perpetrated



Voluble Bede



King Alfred himself set a regrettable example

over forty works, most of them in Latin, but some in Anglo-Saxon. This was the voluble Bede. Nothing could now stem the rising tide, and towards the end of the ninth century King Alfred himself set a regrettable example to all and sundry by translating several Latin



The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle

books into the vernacular. This precocious monarch also founded a periodical called the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, which, though it never had more than a limited circulation, ran, on and off and in and out, for over two hundred years. Some time later another king, Canute the Great Dane, besides encouraging the monks to persevere with their Dog Latin, gave native



Gave native writers several hearty pats on the back

writers several hearty pats on the back, and it is impossible to say how far things might have gone had not the country been saved by the Norman Conquest. This

put the lid on Anglo-Saxon literature for good and all. And here we may remind schoolgirls and students (if the distinction between the two may be pardoned) that they can never sufficiently thank William and his merry men for bringing this period of our literature to a welcome close and thus to some



This put the lid on Anglo-Saxon literature

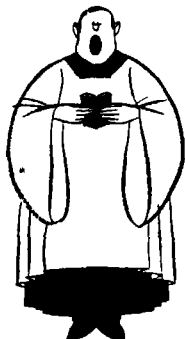
extent defeating the nefarious enthusiasm of modern examining bodies for setting papers on books which have to be studied with a dictionary

To illustrate the rugged, unkempt quality of Old English verse, we append a sample taken from the *Beowulf*, its spot poem

Him oa ge-giredan
Geata leode
Ad on eorðan
Un-wac-licne

Helm-be-hongen
 Hilde-bordu
 Beorhtu byrnu
 Swa he bena waes.

If, Angela, you can induce some hundred-per-cent
 he-bass from the back row of your local choir-scrum



*Some hundred-per-cent
 he-bass from the back
 row of your local
 choir-scrum*

to chant these lines to you, you will at once perceive that Old English poetry is a thing to be avoided at all costs by a nice-minded girl. Though the passage is really quite harmless, yet, properly rendered, it sounds like a string of full-blooded curses.

Noting finally that most Old English literature is, for pretty obvious reasons, anonymous, let us without more ado proceed to the slightly brighter story revealed by Plantagenet times

Of the hundred and thirty-four years after the Norman Conquest we shall say very little—in fact, nothing at all. This is not because we know nothing about them, but because they contain nothing worth recording. We will therefore jump this period and get on at once to the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. These we may, if we like, divide as follows:

1200–1300 thirteenth century,
 1300–1400 fourteenth century.

These divisions are, however, quite unimportant, and are inserted merely for the sake of euphony, they should be forgotten as soon as possible. On the other hand, the remainder of the chapter, together with the footnotes, should be learnt by heart.

By 31 December, 1200, Old English, though completely outed as a literary medium, had, contrary to expectations, swallowed Norman French, but during the process had suffered such a severe attack of indigestion that its constitution was permanently impaired—so much so, in-

deed, that it became changed more or less into English. For which we may be thankful. This more-or-less English is now known as Middle English. The question then arose, which, if any, of the various dialects that were spoken was to



Dismissed with a contemptuous sniff

be considered standard English. The North, South and Midlands had a long scrap about this, but in the end the East Midland dialect won because London used that particular variety.

The poetry of the greater part of the period is quite devoid of vim and may be dismissed with a contemptuous sniff. The idea was apparently something like this: a new language was coming into existence—everybody felt that, though nobody could

*Magicians*

make out exactly what it was. Well, then, it was obviously up to somebody to get a move on with the Muse, unless we wanted to take the count from the frog-eaters¹ across the Channel, who had already started some pretty quill-pushing. The result was that quite a number of worthy sportsmen entered the ring before they were

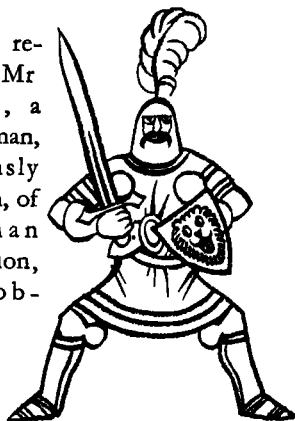
properly trained—real triers, most of them, but no great class.

One of the first to respond to the call was Mr

*Dwarfs*

Wace, a gentleman, curiously enough, of Norman extraction, who ob-

liged with a little effort whimsically called *The Brut* and relating in thirty thousand lines how the British Kingdom

*Knights errant*

¹The French, so called from their habit of devouring snails

had been founded by Brutus, which of course it hadn't, but in those days people would believe anything on sheep's skin. Others followed with long poems on romantic themes—all about magicians and dwarfs (or dwarves) and knights errant and dismal damsels—getting their materials very largely from the legends connected with King Arthur.¹



Dismal damsels

Several earnest ink-slingers, too, in a hopeless attempt to improve the general tone of society, slogged away at religious and allegorical compositions. Two of these should be noticed. William Langland wrote a thing with the crisp title of *The Vision of William concerning Piers the Plowman*, while John Gower in his *Confessio Amantis* dealt with the seven deadly sins, illustrating them with pleasing anecdotes which

¹Or, according to some authorities, Arthur King. An early British caterer who hit on the idea of supplying knights errant with cheap meals at a large circular table. This gave rise to the Round Table Club. Arthur, soon after being elected president and treasurer, disappeared and was never seen again, though he is believed to have subsequently embarked on the cider trade at a place called Avilion, 'fair with orchard lawns'. The R T C then went into liquidation. The story has always appealed strongly to the British public in general and, when it was advertised by the Great Western Railway, to the Cornwall caterers in particular.

are still chuckled over in the senior common-rooms of Oxford. None of these people, however, was in the



In the senior common-rooms of Oxford

same street with Geoffrey Chaucer, of whom we shall speak in our next chapter

II

CHAU CER



THE story of this great man's career is full of encouragement for young people of a literary turn. In the account which follows we have tried by means of italics to emphasize the points which should particularly appeal to intending poets.

Geoffrey Chaucer, the father or, as some prefer to think, the uncle of English poetry, was born in London before, in, or after the year 1340, the son of a vintner. As nothing whatever is known of his babyhood or boyhood, we shall not enlarge upon them. The first certain piece of information that emerges about him is that at the age of seventeen he was attached to the household of Prince Lionel, a son of Edward III, in the capacity of a page. Now these billets were, as a

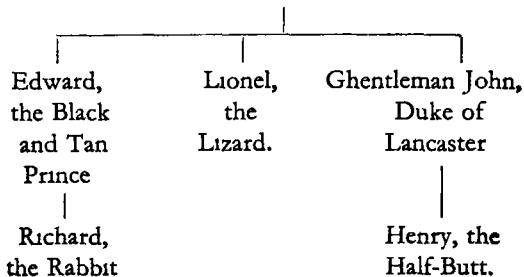


Young people of a literary turn

rule, reserved for the children of the nobility and gentry, and the Chaucers were not in society—quite outside the paddock, in fact. How, then, did his father wangle this job for Geoffrey? We may well ask, but we shall never know. All that can be said is that Chaucer père had at one time been a government contractor. At any rate, there Geoffrey was, and, since he was destined

to be a good deal mixed up with Royalty, we shall at this point insert a few twigs from Edward III's family tree

King Edward III



This will lend an air of verisimilitude to the narrative, and should also serve to clear your mind a bit, Angela, always supposing, of course, that such a feat is possible.

The young page got on well at court, becoming quite a pet of the King's and making friends with Ghentleman John. As a proof of the esteem in which he was held it is only necessary to state that when, in 1359, he carelessly allowed himself to be taken prisoner in France, Edward, after thinking it over for a year, eventually *bought him back for £16*.

No other English poet has ever been known to fetch such a price. Soon afterwards he was created an esquire, and granted *twenty marks a year as a valet*. From this position it was an easy step to gain



A page



Wangle this job

ambassadorial rank, and during the next few years Geoffrey (if we may still be so familiar) was sent on several delicate, and occasionally dubious, errands abroad. On his return from one of these the



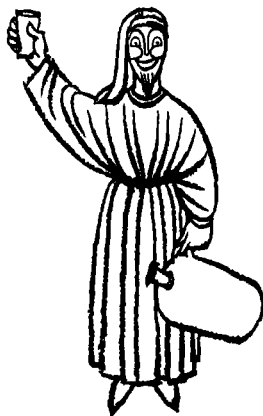
Bought him back for £16

King, realizing that poets need a stimulant, granted him a *pitcher of wine a day*, he also made him *Comptroller of Wool, Skins and Leather* in the Port of London. Under the next monarch, Richard the Rabbit, our hero for a short time *actually became an MP*. He was subsequently appointed *Clerk of the Works at Westminster* and received a *fresh pension of £20 and a tun of wine (2,016 pints) per annum*, which in addition to the previous pitcher a day must be admitted to be a generous allowance. Henry the Half-Butt,¹ taking his cue from

¹This son of Ghentleman John bagged the throne after potting Richard the Rabbit in one of the bottom pockets of Pontefract Castle.

his predecessor, showed Geoffrey much favour and doubled his pension. He decided, however, not to increase his liquor ration, and so in the following year (1400) the poet died.

As a comptroller of wool, skins and leather, Chaucer ranks very high. Though his spelling was always wobbly, he wrote a capital school-teacher hand, made the neatest of figures, and was seldom late at the office except on the mornings after Saints' days.



A pitcher of wine a day

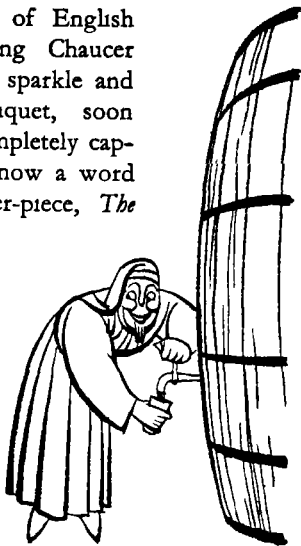


Became an M.P.

His poetic fame rests largely on his skill as a blender, which he probably inherited from his father. Drawing the greater part of his subject-matter first from French and afterwards from Italian springs, he succeeded in disguising the mixture with several bucketsful of the purest Middle English. This no doubt explains why Spenser afterwards referred to him

as 'Dan Chaucer, well of English undefyled.' The resulting Chaucer brand, with its pleasant sparkle and distinctive British bouquet, soon became popular and completely captured the market. And now a word about Geoffrey's master-piece, *The Canterbury Tales*.

In those ghastly old days there were no cheap excursion trains to Blackpool or Southend, and even if there had been it wouldn't have been much good, because boarding-houses and piers and bands and bathing had not yet been thought of.



And a tun of wine



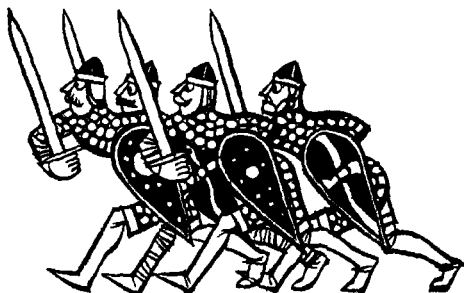
The mornings after Saints' Days

Consequently, whenever people wanted a holiday, they just slung a clean smock or two and a few sandwiches into a knapsack and got across a horse and rode off on a pilgrimage to the shrine of some old saint, thus combining pleasure with duty. One of the favourite shrines was at Canterbury and contained the bones of T. Becket, a very irritating archbishop who had



Rode off on a pilgrimage

been bumped off by four Norman knights about two hundred years previously, and had thus acquired an extraordinary reputation for holiness *The Canterbury Tales* are stories in verse supposed to have been told by a rather mixed lot of male and female hikers on their way from London to Canterbury and back. As originally planned these stories would have run to well



Four Norman Knights

over a hundred, but the poet did not live long enough to make his century and was out for a couple of dozen or so. Ought we to regret this? Frankly, no, Angela. Much as we may, with the aid of a glossary, appreciate the greatness of Chaucer's work, keenly as we may relish his humour, his satire, his inimitable character-painting and his kindness in providing publishers with non-copyright material, we feel, when we have ploughed through the Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*, that what he has left us is sufficient. Anything more would have been in the nature of an anti-climax.

III

THE END OF THE MIDDLE AGES



IN the fifteenth century English poetry went through a phase of dry rot, and a good deal of this was written. We shall not even mention the names of any of the poets, they do not deserve it. In Scotland, apparently, some rather stouter work was done. Not long ago we came across the following question in an examination paper: 'What do you know of the Scottish¹ Chaucerians?' The obvious answer, of course, is 'Nothing at all,' and in our opinion this should gain full marks. But the question continued to haunt us, especially in bed. Finally we consulted an encyclopædia and found—who would have thought it?—that

¹This adjective should always be written 'Scottish,' not 'Scotch,' except when it improves the nouns 'whisky,' 'mutton' and 'men.'



James I

the best known of the Scottish Chaucers was none other than our old friend Jems I, author of a poem called the *Kings Quhair*,¹ while half a lap behind him came Wullie Dunbar, a sort of northern poet laureate. So that, merely that, was that

Of English prose writers you need remember only two, the rest are religious William Caxton, besides translating some French works, stands confessed as our first printer.

But it would be unfair to blame him overmuch, because printing had already broken out in Germany, and probably nothing could have saved us from catching it. Sir Thomas More wrote in Latin a smart satire² entitled



Stands confessed as our first printer

¹Though only one 'h' occurs here, every letter is really aspirated in this word, which should be pronounced 'hghuhahih'. The prodigality of the Scots in the matter of aspirates is supposed by some authorities to account for the strong gales which so often rage north of the Tweed. This King Jems (*anglice* James) was for a long time a prisoner in England, and the poem is all about a lady whom he met in a garden there. He afterwards married her and died young.

²Poetry or prose written with the object of making somebody feel a pretty small potato. Not to be confused with 'satyr', a sort of he-goat skipping about in a wood on its hind legs with nothing on.

Utopia, which was afterwards translated into English. As a prose writer he might have gone far, or at least farther than he did, but having been worsted by Henry VIII in a political argument, in the course of which he completely lost his head, he abandoned the pursuit of letters. On the whole, however, there are no literary people who would interest you very much, Angela, between the time of Chaucer and the Elizabethan Age, so we shall devote the remainder of this chapter to the discussion of one or two general topics which must sooner or later engage the attention of every earnest schoolgirl. These are the Lyric, the Ballad, the Early Drama, and the Renaissance.



Henry VIII

The Lyric is—well, when you have subtracted the epic and dramatic elements from the sum-total of poetry, it's most of what you get left, if you follow us. At any rate, Herrick's *Gather ye Rosebuds* (have you heard that one?) is a lyric, and so is *Tip-toe through the Tulips*. The lyric is very ancient, so ancient, indeed, that the earliest known specimens are to-day quite mossy, but it was during the period we are now studying that it first began to crop up in large quantities, and just before the Elizabethan Age the whole of England and even some parts of Scotland became covered with a dense growth of this kind of poetry.

So there it is, Angela, and as we can't get away from it, we've got to put it in our pipes¹ and smoke it



*Bandyng ballads about from mouth
to mouth*

The Ballad is a sort of young epic gone wrong, that is to say, if its length and breadth and style and metre and subject-matter had all been quite different it might, with luck, have been an epic, but, as it is, it is only a ballad. Read *Chevy Chase*. This form of poetry began to be committed in writing in the middle of the fifteenth century, how long before that

but for goodness knows people had been in the habit of bandying ballads about from mouth to mouth in a careless, ignorant way without ever realizing what they were, and since a great many of these early ones never got on to parchment, they have mercifully been lost. Then a



Into old trunks and hat-boxes

¹Avoid cigarettes as you would a split infinitive. Pipes are far less injurious for girls still at school.

little later the Elizabethan drama came along, and everybody got so keen on this that they felt fed up with ballads and just dumped those they had by them into old trunks and hat-boxes and shoved them away under their beds or into a corner of the garage pending the discovery of Britain by America. In fact, the ballad was buried.¹



When people felt strong and jolly

The Early Drama is an enormous subject and we should like to leave it out, but honour forbids. We will, however, say as little about it as possible. The drama proper, which came into action in the middle

¹And need never have been exhumed if it hadn't been for the exasperating interference of an antiquarian poke-nose of the eighteenth century. This man (who you may be surprised to hear was a bishop) happened one day to notice a lady friend taking some suspicious-looking sheets of parchment out of a worm-eaten chest in order to use them, very rightly and properly, as jam-pot covers. In his episcopal way he instantly commandeered them and found that they were covered all over with old ballads. These he copied out and published, and all the highbrows said that he had unearthed one of the glories of English literature. Thus through an unlucky accident yet another item was added to examination syllabuses. *Sunt lacrimae rerum*. You do take Latin, don't you? If not, never mind, it's of no consequence.

of the sixteenth century, had several rude predecessors. The very earliest and rudest of these were the *Mummings*, performed at seasons such as Easter and Christmas, when people felt strong and jolly, they were something like dumb charades with the guessing part omitted. Then came the *Mystery Play*, the representation of some scriptural scene like Jonah in the



Lions ignoring Daniel

Whale or the Lions ignoring Daniel. This was accompanied by the *Miracle Play*, giving episodes from the lives of the Saints, and as many of these had been first-class magicians and conjurers, now and then you got a real thriller. Mystery and Miracle Plays were encouraged by the clergy, who said, very truly, that they were every bit as good as Sunday Schools and far more entertaining. The next development, the *Morality*, was generally quite a dull affair in which the characters were merely abstract qualities—Conceit, Greediness, Mercy, etc., but sometimes they were

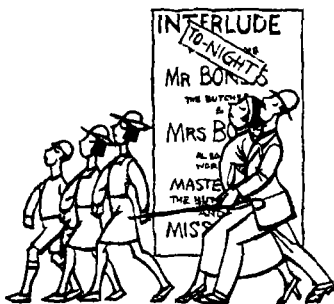
made fairly amusing by a sort of clown called the Vice, who used to tease the Devil by pulling his tail and doing other unpleasant things to him.¹ Finally we get the *Interlude*. This depicted real people like Mr Bones the Butcher and Mrs Bun the Baker's Wife, and was often very humorous, though hardly the kind of show that a nice modern daddy would take his family to see. Let us leave it at that.



Tease the Devil by pulling his tail

The Renaissance, or revival of classical learning (with complications)—another colossal topic, but we will do our best to give you some idea of it, starting *ab ovo* and

endeavouring to put the whole thing in an egg-shell



Though hardly the kind of show that a nice modern daddy would take his family to see

A long, long time ago, when bears were still biting the Ancient Britons, the Greeks and Romans lived in a state of extreme culture, having three or four hot baths a day and

¹Always be kind to animals, Angela Are you a Girl Guide?

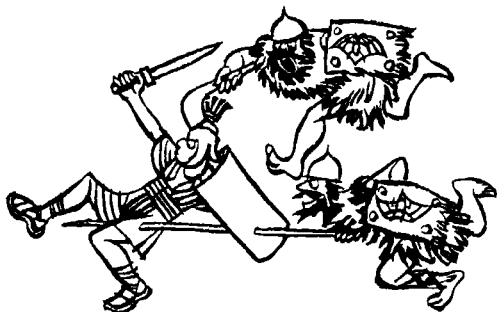
composing the cleverest works in poetry and prose. We cannot go into details here, but your brother Richard will assure you, on the authority of one who has already spent two years in the classical lower fifth, that Xenophon knew more about parasangs than any modern historian, and that for sheer staying-power the poet Virgil stands in a class by himself. Then, fairly early A.D., a lot of barbarian invaders crumpled up the Roman Empire. These



Lived in a state of extreme culture

people—Huns, Franks, Vandals and Goths (both Visi- and Ostro-)—were so ignorant that they could not even write their names and had to receipt their bills with a X. We should therefore hardly expect them to care much for the culture of Greece and Rome. Nor did they. On the contrary, they gave it a complete miss for some hundreds of years. This period is known as the Dark Ages on account of the obscure complexions

of the Barbarians, who, unlike the Romans, never took a bath unless they fell into a river. After centuries of



A lot of barbarian invaders crumpled up the Roman Empire

scrapping about all over Europe, however, the invaders gradually settled down, till at last they discovered one day, to their surprise, that they had turned into Frenchmen, Germans, Spaniards, etc.

Meanwhile the monks had gone on all this time writing Latin prose and studying Aristotle¹ and Cicero² and



Unless they fell into a river

¹A Greek gentleman who wrote a lot of books in little jerks and had been on both the classical and the modern side at school

²A Roman orator with a terrific flow of language and, according to Shakespeare, a face like a stoat



This made them feel rather superior

the Surly Fathers,¹ and as they seemed, oddly enough, to get a good deal of quiet fun out of these authors, in the end the non-monks began to think that perhaps, after all, there might be something in them. So they asked the monks to teach them

Greek and Latin Well, the monks were not frightfully keen on other people getting to know the things they knew, because so far they had been the only ones who knew anything at all and this made them feel rather superior. So they advised them to let well alone. But alas! it was no good, and from the fourteenth century onwards we are faced by the revival of classical learning, which, beginning in Italy with a very earnest poet called Dante,² spread across the Alps and eventually reached the British Isles in the time of the Tudors (1485 to 1603, Angela)

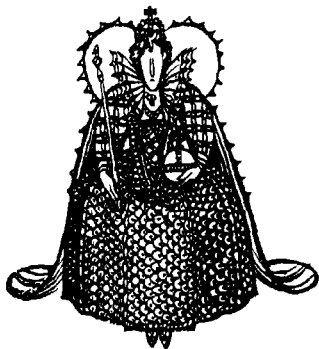


In Italy with a very earnest poet called Dante

¹Old bishops, etc., who composed religious tracts and started the S P C K

²Pronounced as two syllables. This man fell in love with a girl called Beatrice, but was too shy to mention it to her, so she married another fellow. Dante then went to Hell and brought back an interesting account of the people he met there.

IV
THE ELIZABETHAN AGE



WHAT with printing and the Renaissance and the increase of Henry VIII's legs¹ and Mary Tudor's fondness for cooking Protestants, a distinct spirit of unrest invaded England during the first half of the sixteenth century, and this was reflected in literature, especially in the lyric. Anybody, of course, can write a lyric—we have ourselves, often, but not everybody can do it with the precision and snap that are the hall-mark of genuine poetry. As in boxing and fencing,

¹In size, not in number. They eventually became like bolsters and made him very irritable, and of course he had always been the sort of man who would as soon cut your head off as look at you, any day—in fact, sooner.

much depends on the proper management of the feet. Poets now began to make a serious study of this and good results were obtained. The sonnet was imported

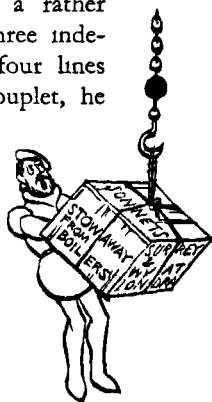


Henry VIII's legs

from Italy by the firm of Surrey and Wyatt. This was a little poem of fourteen pentameter¹ lines, rhyming abbaabba and go as you please in the last six. It caught on at once, and since its first appearance in this country nearly

all the poets of the last four hundred years have exuded a few specimens of it, and some quite a number. Shakespeare, of whom we shall speak in our next chapter, wrote 154 sonnets in a rather different form, consisting of three independently rhyming stanzas of four lines each, followed by a rhyming couplet; he was always a bit different from other people and liked to make up his own rules as he went along. Blank verse, or non-rhyming te-tum te-tum te-tum te-tum te-tums, was also invented at this time.

We are now, Angela, about to plunge into a period which has been aptly termed 'the Golden Age of English Literature,' and in order to understand it you must try to absorb

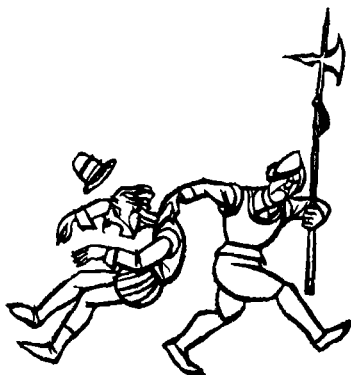


Imported from Italy

¹Five feet, te-tum te-tum te-tum te-tum te-tum.

into your system some definite ideas of what England was like under good Queen Bess

Geographically, it closely resembled, both in size and shape, our land of to-day, but the weather, owing



Hauled off

to the strong government of the Tudors, was much better, with a well-marked distinction between summer and winter. Socially and politically, however, it was another world. For one thing, as the population was much smaller than at present, you could walk freely about without being pushed off the island into the sea, hence the phrase, 'the spacious times of great Elizabeth'. Life, too, was far jollier. In the previous reign, if one of Queen Mary's spies¹ happened to overhear

¹Usually Jesuits and very hard to spot, because they disguised themselves in such ingenious ways—as tram-conductors or old women, or even (the smaller ones) boy scouts

you remark that the Pope was a wash-out or Philip of Spain a footler, you had been liable to be hauled off and grilled as a steak without being given time even to kiss the children good-bye, and this had made everybody feel very uncomfortable. But the new queen didn't care a hoot about Philip or the Pope, and if she wanted to execute people for anything, merely had them hanged, drawn and quartered, which was less lingering, because, unless you were a person of exceptional vitality, you never felt much of the last two items, so everybody breathed again. At length England really was Merrie England. There was no income tax, politicians were few, and the best cuts of meat cost only a penny a pound. Thus the populace became very



Very lightsome

lightsome, and when they were not devouring fat capons and huge slabs of underdone beef and drinking beer out of silver mugs, they were generally shouting 'God save Queen Bess' or dancing on their village greens.

Elizabeth was the idol of her subjects, many of

whom were her personal friends, for she was always dashing about the country and never passed a pub without dropping in and asking someone to stand her a drink, which naturally endeared her to all. Her court in London, then as now the metropolis, was a splendid affair, with hot meals served at all hours and picnics and dances and dressing up, and a big Yule-log fire in the drawing-room every 25th of December. Best of all, Parliament gave nothing like the trouble it does now. If any pie-faced M.P. tried to pass an act to stop Sunday archery or the sale of chocolates after eight o'clock, Elizabeth just sent for him and—well, no more was heard about it. Thus England was efficiently governed, well fed and contented, and as time rolled on and Elizabeth became year by year more and more of a virgin queen, her language at last grew

*Pie-faced M.P.**Positive adoration*

so simply awful that her subjects' affection for her deepened into positive adoration

Meanwhile beneath this fair exterior the Renaissance was doing its deadly work. Everywhere the storm was brewing. At the gay London court, in the country houses of the nobility, even at Oxford and Cambridge,



Studying the classics with one hand and writing poetry and prose with the other

little groups of people were busily studying the classics with one hand and writing poetry and prose with the other. The greatest of the non-dramatic poets was Edmund Spenser, who had a government job in

Ireland. Here he planned a long allegorical poem called the *Faerie Queene*, but after getting about half-way through, he dropped it. For this we must partly thank the native Irish, who were more wide-awake than the English. Discovering what Spenser was doing in the privacy of his spare bedroom, they promptly set his house on fire and forced him to leave the country. He was never the same man again, poor fellow. But in any case the *Faerie Queene* had already got into such a muddle with everyone being someone else and no one, not even the poet himself, being sure who was really who, or why, that it is doubtful if he could have gone on much farther with it. What we have of it, though, is very beautiful, with its old-world atmosphere and language which are like nothing on earth.

Lyric poetry now began to be poured out by all sorts of people too numerous to be mentioned here by name, and there was a flood of translations of the classics—Homer,¹ Virgil, Ovid, etc. These were all very well in their way, and, indeed, a boon to boys, but the snag about them was that they supplied models for original composition. Another form of literature which appeared was the essay, popularized by Francis Bacon. Here the author, who was a science specialist, was going off his proper beat, he wrote his essays just to amuse himself—unless, of course, it was sheer devilment, as it may well have been, for Bacon was not a nice man.



Such a muddle

All this activity, however, hardly amounted to a row of beans when compared with the spate of Poetic Drama which swept over the country. So far, practically no real plays had been written, that is, tragedies and comedies divided into formal acts and scenes. A tragedy is a play in which Fate has the hero by the short hairs from the very start. He may be quite a decent fellow, but he never has a real chance and

¹By Chapman, a prominent sportsman of the period, but not, as is often supposed, a cricketer. He seems to have been a 'Varsity rowing coach and, like most of his kind, not averse to calling a spade a spade, we note that it was his custom to 'speak out loud and bold.'

always dies in the last act, generally because he has slipped a knife into somebody with fatal results, or, less frequently, because he is under a curse. In the former



Not a nice man

case he obviously can't be allowed to survive, since it is impossible to overlook slips of this kind, while in the latter a good hefty curse (especially a family one) is simply bound to come true, or what would be the use of it? In a comedy, on the other hand, the hero never becomes cold meat. Whatever may happen to anyone

else, being Fortune's blue-eyed boy, *he's* all right and with or without care invariably finishes this side up.

The first English dramatists, being up to their necks in the Renaissance, naturally set out to copy the Classics. From the ancients they inherited a very hampering set of rules for playwrights. The Dramatic Unities, as they were called, were only three in number, but they got you at every turn.

(1) The Unity of Time said that as Einstein had not yet been born and might possibly still be averted, it could only be one



A good hefty curse

time at once, and the best brand was G.M.T. corrected to sea-level, all others, including summer time and jazz, to be strictly barred

(2) The Unity of Place said that for the same reason, except when parts were taken by professional acrobats, no character was to be regarded as being in more than one place at one and the same time

(3) The Unity of Action said that on the same stage and on the same side of it, one play, and only one, could be acted simultaneously with itself

These moth-eaten restrictions, of course, could never be tolerated for long in a free country, and they were soon thrown overboard, especially by Shakespeare

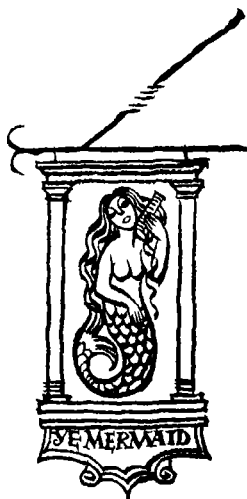
The drama proper started just before Elizabeth came to the throne, but it is not till

we reach the University Wits (so called because most of them had succeeded in passing Responsions or the Little Go) that we find it in full swing. The names of these young fellows—Kyd, Peele, Green, Lodge, Nash—still ring across the centuries like music in our ears, but the only thing you need remember about them, Angela, is that they were chiefly remarkable for the extreme rapidity of their careers,



Fortune's blue-eyed boy

of which the less said the better At their head stood Christopher Marlowe, the worst of the lot and a really first-class dramatist if it hadn't been for Shakespeare Which brings us at last to a super poet who deserves a chapter to himself



V
SHAKESPEARE



WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, destined to be the greatest dramatist of the solar system, occurred at Stratford-on-Avon (Warwickshire) in the year 1564, soon after Francis Bacon, the well-known scientist, essayist and cartographer. Of William's boyhood much of the little that has been gathered is probably wrong, and the same may be said of his later history. It is almost certain, though, that for some years, when not otherwise engaged, he attended the local school, and that before the age of seventeen he had acquired a knowledge of the Greek alphabet and a facility, still common among our more precocious youth, in reading Ovid with a crib or, when opportunity offered, the crib without Ovid. Mere bookish learning, however, formed but a small part of his education. He was

always drinking in something, even if it was only the ginger-beer behind the counter when his father (the Selfridge of Stratford) was out of the shop, and what-



Drinking in something

ever he picked up—a green apple, maybe, or a slab of chewing-gum or a packet of Woodbines—we may be quite sure he retained All these things became part and parcel of his very being, and the experience of life which he gained doubtless accounts largely for the sympathetic understanding he afterwards showed of the many ills that flesh is heir to.

While yet in his 'teens, William ran across Anne Hathaway and immediately succumbed to her charms. She was considerably his senior, and just what it was in her that attracted him he could never satisfactorily explain even to himself. Probably, like most poets, he was very susceptible. In any case, she annexed him and they became engaged. After a time Miss Hathaway suggested a wedding. William was rather taken aback. It was all very well for Anne—she was six-and-twenty, but was he, at eighteen, really to be tied up like this? 'To be or not to be,' he muttered, 'that is the question.'



Immediately succumbed

Finally, unwilling to disappoint the lady, he hit on a compromise. He underwent the ceremony, but soon afterwards escaped by the early-morning wagon to London, leaving Anne a grass-widow in the Midlands.

Arrived in the metropolis, he made instinctively for the stage. At first the only rôle he could secure was the comparatively insignificant one of holding the horses¹ parked by playgoers near the theatre, but after a time promotion came, and he began to take more important parts, such as an alarum, an excursion, or a stifled cry without. Thence onwards his advance was rapid, and in a few years his ability as an actor was recognized by all.

Meanwhile he had started also as a dramatist. With the aid of a pair of scissors (probably Anne's), a paste-pot and a second-hand typewriter,² he set to work patching up old plays and altering those written by

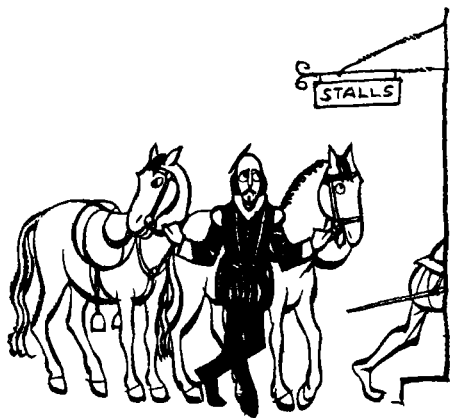


Afterwards escaped

¹Yet even this he enjoyed, and there is reason to believe that he afterwards looked back with something like regret to the struggles of those early days. 'A horse, a horse!' he exclaims in *Richard III*, 'my kingdom for a horse!'

²He could almost certainly also use a pen, but no letter written by him has survived, and only one written to him. This was from a Mr R. Quiney, asking for a loan of £30. What Shakespeare's reply was we cannot say, but since he presented his daughter Judith to Quiney's son as a wife, it looks as if he may possibly have preferred giving outright to lending. Many generous people do.

his contemporaries Here his success made his fellow-playwrights jealous of 'this bird, Shakescene,' as one of them wittily called him But William did not care He went on to compose original plays of his own,

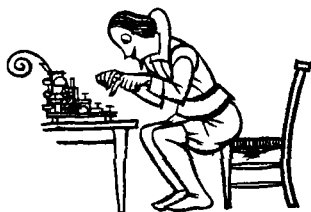


Holding the horses

borrowing any plot that took his fancy and tapping on his faithful typewriter the deepest springs of human tears and laughter. And before long he had out-distanced all his rivals and made enough money to retire on, which he immediately did The closing years of his life were spent in his native town, where he invested so much of his capital in house property that by the time of his death in 1616 he was beloved and respected by all This early retirement of Shakespeare's is possibly the strongest point in his favour, he knew

when to stop. Even so, many modern schoolboys and schoolgirls are inclined to think that he went too far, some, indeed, blaming him for ever having begun. But Britons as a whole are proud of their great poet-dramatist, and there are few of the more cultured of them who have not read his name on the back of the handsome volume (half-calf, a wedding present from cousin Ethel) which stands in the parlour bookshelf between *Mrs Beeton's Cookery* and *Three Hundred and One Things a Bright Girl can do*.

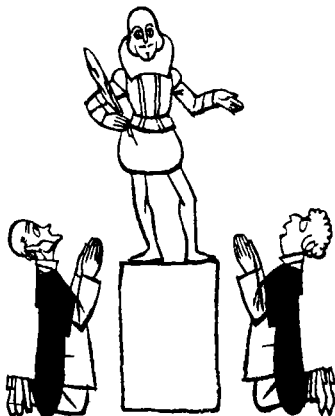
And now, Angela, we have to ask ourselves, what is the secret of Shakespeare's success? Why do his early editions command a higher price than those of



Tapping on his faithful typewriter

Mr H. G. Wells or Miss Edith Sitwell? Why have such masses of frightful notes been appended to every line he has written? Why after 300 years is he still the idol of the Oxford and Cambridge and other School Examination Boards? And why, oh, why are his plays so unflaggingly acted in school halls and gymnasiums? Several answers suggest themselves.

(1) Shakespeare was the first Englishman to make the drama pay. This no doubt in great measure explains the admiration with which his fellow-countrymen and actor-managers have always regarded him



*The idol of the Oxford and Cambridge
School Examination Board*

(2) Writing at a period when the English language was far less copious than it is to-day, Shakespeare nevertheless contrived to use 15,000 different words (excluding proper names, which, of course, do not count), or about five times as many as are employed by a modern stockbroker. Hence the reverence in which he is held by (a) the Stock Exchange, always a leader of literary opinion, and (b) literary weevils who misspend their time in burrowing after

obsolete words and phrases which are better dead and buried.

(3) Shakespeare's humour possesses certain basic properties which are essentially British. Surface fashions in humour are ever changing, nothing more rapidly, but in its heart of hearts the British Public still enjoys a good downright unblushing pun or the sight of a fat man sitting suddenly on the floor



A fat man sitting suddenly on the floor

when someone has jerked his chair from behind him.

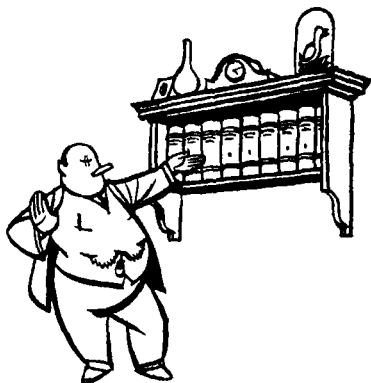
(4) Schools act Shakespeare's plays in preference to others for the following good reasons —

- (a) Nearly all educational establishments possess copies of them
- (b) The Head of the English Department has usually read several of these
- (c) Members of the staff have had to take part in Shakespeare's plays themselves when at school,

♣ SHAKESPEARE AND THAT CRUSH

and what was sauce for the geese is sauce for the goslings

- (d) Parents and school governors enjoy thinking they enjoy Shakespearian plays
- (e) The pupils can't help themselves
- (f) No fees are due to agents.



In the parlour bookshelf

VI
THE AGE OF MILTON



EVEN before Shakespeare's retirement play-writing had begun to wobble. People like Ben Jonson and Beaumont and Fletcher still kept on at it, but of course they quite understood that they were not in the same swim as the Swan of Avon and knew they had little chance of being set in any future examinations except those for the most advanced students on Authors of the Second Magnitude, so perhaps this made them rather despondent and they didn't try as hard as they might have done. At any rate, the drama was already in a pretty bad way when a cold douche of Puritanism suddenly descended upon it with both feet.¹ The chief thing about the Puritans

¹An example of mixed metaphor, Angela, a figure of speech to be carefully avoided by all examination candidates



Their noses

was their noses, which they used extensively for looking down and singing psalms through ¹ Realizing that all the English people except themselves, and even a few of the Scots, had grown very light-hearted and wicked, and

suspecting that the stage was largely to blame for this desperate state of affairs, they now gathered round the theatres and looked so hard down their



Didn't care a bit

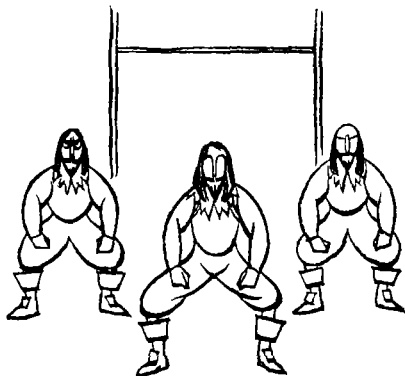
noses at them that by degrees they managed to get them all shut up

So much for the drama, poor thing In checking

¹Another warning Except in cases of fire, act of God, or other sudden emergency, never use a preposition in this way to finish a sentence up with

other forms of literature the Puritans were less successful. Lyric poetry continued to flourish In this field Robert Herrick, George Herbert, Richard Lovelace and several other bright souls composed some perfectly charming verses and didn't care a bit for the Puritans' noses

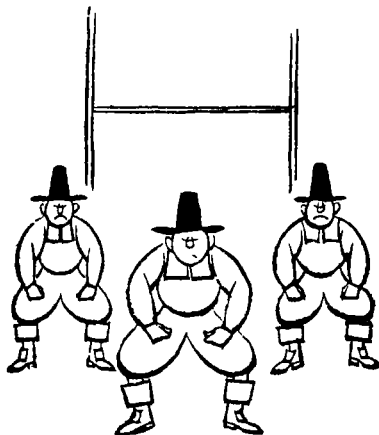
Much more prose began to be written, often, we



The King and his crowd

regret to say, of a very fierce character The reason for this was that during the reign of Charles I the country gradually lined up in two sides for one of those good hearty internal scraps which the English used to find so refreshing when unable to get a fixture with a foreign foe One goal was defended by the King and his crowd, who announced that the members of parliament were just a lot of little boys with round heads

and the Puritans old women with no manners. At the opposite (gasworks) end the M P's maintained that, whatever the shape of their heads, they were grown-ups and expected to be treated as such, while the

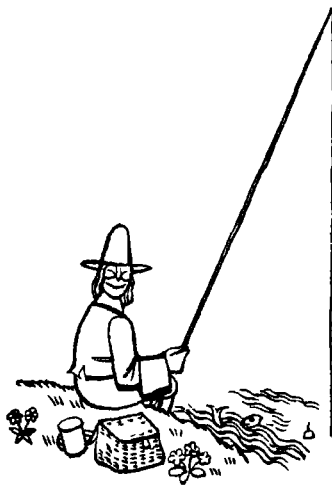


The M P's

Puritans said Charles was talking through his hat about old women, and at any rate they had won more scripture prizes than anybody else, and who was William Laud,¹ anyhow? From the beginning of the

¹He was Archbishop of Canterbury and, being keen on purifying the Church, suggested that congregations should wipe their boots before entering for the Sunday service. He also begged the ladies of Scotland not to confuse officiating clergy by throwing milking-stools at their heads. His firm stand on these and similar points of ecclesiastical etiquette was naturally resented by many lovers of freedom. During the early stages of the great struggle he played a forceful, if occasionally foul, game for Charles at outside divine-right, but soon after half-time was laid out by a serious injury to his neck.

contest both sides kept writing a lot of prose pamphlets to convince (1) themselves, (2) the spectators that they were all right and everybody who disagreed with them was all wrong. This, Angela, is known as controversial literature. Shortly before the end of a most enjoyable game, Oliver Cromwell, though he had been captain of the Parliament side, got himself



A bait-fisher

appointed referee and showed his complete impartiality by (1) beheading Charles for foul play, (2) suspending all the M P 's for being off-side, and (3) making himself Trainer for life.

There were, however, at this period a few writers

who, wishing to live as long as possible without being executed or having their ears bobbed by either party, chose topics to which nobody could object. One of these was Sir Thomas Browne, who lived to be seventy-seven and wrote amongst other things a book on old urns, and another, Izaak Walton, author of *The*



Being educated

Compleat Angler. Everyone liked this so much that Mr. Walton, though an ironmonger and a bait-fisher, was allowed to go on living to the age of ninety. But of course the greatest writer of the seventeenth century, both in verse and prose, was Milton.

John Milton, remarkable for his large mouth and movable ears,¹ was born in 1608 in London, the son of a scrivener.² After being educated at St Paul's School and Cambridge, he settled down to a course of real

¹'O mighty-mouthed inventor of harmonies,' says Tennyson, referring to Milton. 'Phoebus replied and touched my trembling ears,' says Milton, referring to himself.

²The idea that Milton senior was the inventor of a popular mouth-wash is erroneous. We have no documentary evidence for assuming that any member of the family was even in the habit of using a tooth-brush.

study at Horton (Bucks) and by the age of thirty was perfectly at home in French, Italian, Greek, Latin, Hebrew and Syriac. At Latin especially he was so good that when he wasn't thinking he often caught himself actually thinking in it, if you understand us, Angela. During these years he wrote a few poems of a pleasing nature. Two of them, *L'Allegro* (or *The Cheerful Idiot*) and *Il Penseroso* (or *The Morning After*), probably reveal to us Milton himself in different moods. They are much admired for the lofty beauty of their style and their many classical allusions, which you must look up in your brother Richard's dictionary. The same may be said of *Lycidas*, a lament for a friend of the poet's who missed the plank one night in attempting to board the Irish mail boat, at least, it starts and finishes as a lament or elegy, but in the middle Milton switches off the main theme to give the English bishops a nasty



Never liked these bishops

stab. For some reason or other he never liked these

bishops, and after reading *Lycidas* few of them liked him.

In 1638 the young poet went to Italy, where he met the astronomer Galileo, and learnt to his surprise that the earth revolved round the sun and not the sun round the earth, as he had previously imagined. This discovery merely served to increase his contempt for the English prelates, who believed that the whole universe revolved round the Archbishop of Canterbury, and on his return home he at once began to put in some stout work in the back row of the Puritan and Parliamentary scrum. Here he sloshed the other side

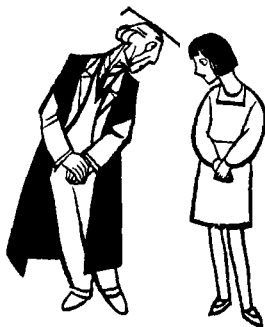


Some stout work

in a series of magnificent pamphlets which established his reputation as a fearless wing forward, and when the whistle blew at the end of the game he was roped in by Oliver Cromwell to write his Latin letters to foreign governments. The result of all this was that for a period of close on twenty years, when at the very height of his powers, Milton refrained almost entirely from verse-writing. A solemn thought, Angela. Let us

pause for a moment of silent thanksgiving for all our mercies.

Just before the Restoration, Milton had decided to return to poetry and give the English language a first-class epic, and shortly after it he set to work in earnest at this task. The difficulty, as he himself complained, was to find a subject worthy of his muse. King



A moment of silent thanksgiving

Arthur rather attracted him, but on examining that monarch's record he apparently thought it wasn't good enough. Most of the stars of classical antiquity had already been written up by other poets. There seemed to be nothing left. Finally he struck out an entirely novel line by selecting Satan as his hero, with first Hell and afterwards, by way of contrast, the Garden of Eden as the scene of the story. On the advice of a friend (who ought to have known better) he composed a sequel to *Paradise Lost*, as he called this great poem,

but in *Paradise Regained* he failed to reproduce his previous form. His last effort was a drama on classical lines entitled *Samson Agonistes*, which would probably have made a decided hit if it had been written 2,000 years earlier.

Poor old Milton! One feels sorry for him. He had three wives and no sense of humour,¹ but he was a fighter from start to finish, and when he wrote his masterpiece he was stone-blind. Grit, Angela—what?

¹ Which is cause and which effect here? We cannot say.



He had three wives

VII
THE CLASSICAL AGE
(1660-1750)



IN order, Angela, to explain to you the change which now comes over English literature, it will be necessary to cough up a little more history

In the year 1660, Prince Charles, who had been in exile up an oak tree on the Continent ever since the fatal battle of Worcester (1651), thought it would be nice to have a change. Gazing at England through his telescope, he perceived that Cromwell was dead and that the people had got sick of the Puritans' noses and Sunday closing and the metrical version of the psalms and nothing to do on Saturday afternoons except take the dog for a walk. So he sent them a cable (reply prepaid) saying 'What about it?' and when they wired

back 'What about what?' he sent another, 'About me being king letter follows' Soon after a letter came in which he said that if they would put him on the throne and give him plenty of pocket-money, he would stick to Magna Carta like glue and encourage the Puritans to emigrate to America and make things jolly again



Except take the dog for a walk

all round, and as far as his father's execution was concerned it was quite all right and everybody was forgiven. The English people thought this sounded fair enough, though they didn't altogether like the bit about pocket-money. Finally they instructed their lawyer to write and say that he could come back and they would settle the question of his weekly allowance later.

The new reign started well, and as Charles was a most gay, affable and jocular king, the people said 'What price Oliver Cromwell now?' Which shows how ungrateful they were, because Cromwell had

really done a lot for the country and it wasn't his fault that he had a wart on his nose which got in the way of his seeing a joke. Unfortunately, Charles soon proved almost *too* gay. He had brought back with him several foreign ideas and habits, such as Sunday bridge, champagne at tea, playing hide-and-seek all over the palace in your pyjamas and never going to bed before half-past eleven or even later. In fact, the court became decidedly French and wicked. The result was that its influence on literature and the stage was bad.

The theatres had been reopened and two comic



The new reign started well

dramatists, William Congreve and William Wycherley, were writing plays over which we need not linger. You are not likely to read them, Angela. Let us pass them by with averted eyes.

Poetry began to copy French and classical models,

especially Latin ones. Now the old Romans, grand fellows in their way, had been first-class lawyers and road-makers, but as poets they mostly failed to ring the bell. Genuine poetry, if you understand us, Angela, is a matter of urge and inspiration, it sweeps over you



Let us pass them by with averted eyes

in a sort of wave, till you feel you've simply got to throw it off your chest or burst. In other words, a real poet writes poetry to save his life. But writing poetry in Latin was more like fitting together the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle than anything else. The consequence was that though the Romans composed some very neat and polished verses, they seldom achieved the authentic gush. The kind of poetry (if it can be called such) that they were best at was the satirical, which doesn't require inspiration so much as a faculty for making

*First-class lawyers*

smart, biting remarks in verse about things and people you don't like. The French at this time rather resembled the Romans in some ways, and though it was easier for them to turn out poetry, because, after all, they were not bothered with longs and shorts, they had got into a very mechanical way of writing it.

Owing to these influences and to the cynical tone of the court, we find the English Muse during the Classical Age striking a bad patch, she becomes affected and artificial, and when she is not indulging in satire mistakes prettiness

*And road-makers*

for beauty and gives us platitudes in place of passion.

The two most important poets of the period were J Dryden (1631-1700) and A Pope (1688-1744), who between them kept the ball rolling for the thick end of a century. Neither was perhaps what one could



Kept the ball rolling

strictly call a lovable man, but they were both very clever and horribly industrious. Dryden composed some rather boring plays, but his real forte was satire, and the same may be said of Pope, who made people positively curl up with the things he wrote about them, and he always put them in such an inevitable sort of way that it was impossible to forget them. His most brilliant effort, though, was *The Rape of the Lock*, a little burlesque epic about a hysterical society damsel who objected to being shingled by an amateur hair-dresser at a picnic.

At this time most of the upper classes in London used to congregate in coffee-houses (coffee being considered rather a smart drink), and the authors and poets had one or two of their own where they foregathered and enjoyed literary heart-to-hearts about the ancient Romans and the dramatic unities and the heroic couplet¹ and other merry topics of the kind



Made people positively curl up

At these meetings Dryden was looked up to as a great authority, and what he said went

More noteworthy than the poetry is the prose of this period, which is marked by the rise of the essay and the periodical press. News sheets had first appeared during the Civil War, when both sides issued frequent bulletins stating that they had as good as won

¹A metre which now became fashionable, consisting of a pair of rhyming pentameters. Each of these couplets formed a separate water-tight compartment and fitted as neatly into the poem as a coal-truck into a goods train.

and advising everybody to join them before it was too late. Various papers, none of much account, cropped up in the reign of Charles II, finally, in the time of Queen Anne, we get the *Tatler* and *Spectator*, which, though in no way resembling their modern namesakes, were really important. They were run by Joseph Addison and Richard Steele, whose chief claim to



Literary heart-to-hearts

notoriety rests on the fact that they were the first of modern journalists. Like several other writers of their day, these two were employed by the Whigs to puff the party and slaughter the opposition in print,¹ and Addison (though always the gentleman) did so well at this that he eventually rose to be a cabinet minister and married a peeress. In the year 1709 Steele wrote to Addison, who was in Ireland.

¹The Tories pursued similar tactics. Dean Swift was one of their hired literary assassins.

'Dear Joe,

'I am returning under separate cover the first four acts of your play *Cato* Frankly, I advise you to put it in the grate If you will pardon my saying so, you seem to me to have not yet discovered your true literary bent I fancy, however, that I have hit on a line in which you might make good I'm just starting a rag here in London called the *Tatler*, and am running short of copy Now why not try your hand at one or two bright



Married a peeress

snappy essays and send them over? You will see from the enclosed recent issues the sort of stuff that is wanted. Choose your own subjects, and for the love of Mike don't exceed the word-limit. I may be mistaken, but I have an idea that you can supply just the

brand of literary marmalade that the British public likes for breakfast

'Yours,
'Dick.

P S. Can you lend me ten guineas till quarter-day?

Addison complied with his friend's request. The *Tatler*, however, soon fizzled out, because the Tories happened to get into power and, as Steele simply could not resist prodding them in the ribs, they made him stop the paper. But he started another on similar lines called the *Spectator*, which he and Addison kept going



Tickled the Londoners

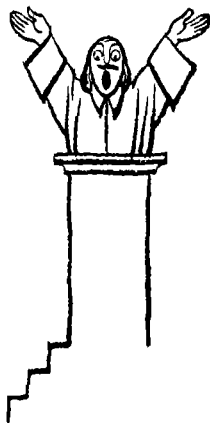
for nearly two years. For the *Tatler* and *Spectator* combined, Addison wrote 316 essays, all exactly the right length, the worst of which would have gained full marks in any school certificate examination. As Steele had predicted, they proved entirely to the popular

taste, easy to digest, neither too stiff nor too sloppy, and with a distinctive tang which appealed pleasantly to the palate. Some of them tell us about the members of the imaginary Spectator Club,¹ the chief of whom was an old knight named Sir Roger de Coverley. This particular series tickled the Londoners tremendously.

Besides Addison and Steele we have space to glance at only one or two other prose-writers.

John Bunyan in the middle of the seventeenth century began by leading the sinful life of a plumber or, as some say, of a tinker, but later repented, took up preaching, and was consequently imprisoned in Bedford gaol, where he learnt the Bible by heart and wrote the *Pilgrim's Progress*.

Samuel Pepys was a civil servant under Charles II and James II and, having thus a great amount of spare time at his disposal, compiled a colossal diary in shorthand which nobody could decipher for over a



Took up Preaching

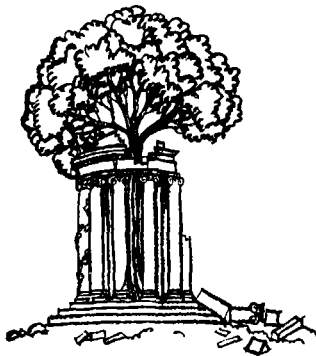
¹Steele really invented the Spectator Club and wrote some of the sketches about it, but they weren't so good as Addison's. It was always like that. Steele hit on an idea and Addison bagged it and went one better. But Steele didn't care as long as he could sting Addison for an occasional fiver.

hundred years, as he had not studied Pitman's. Owing to his inveterate habit of going to bed almost every night of the week from boyhood onwards, he survived to the age of seventy, despite his addiction, as an Admiralty official, to small beer and oysters

Jonathan Swift, our most powerful and savage prose satirist, was an Irish parson (episcopal) and wrote pamphlets for the Tories because he hoped they would make him a bishop, but Queen Anne thought he was no gentleman, so they only made him a dean. This naturally embittered him, and he wrote *Gulliver's Travels*, which is still enjoyed alike by adults and (in expurgated editions) by the young



VIII
CLASSIC TO ROMANTIC



YOU have, Angela, no doubt observed one very distressing feature of English literature—that the farther we get the more there is of it. We are now coming to a period so crowded with names that all we can do is to remark on some general tendencies and pick out a few important writers for honourable mention. But you must remember that there are lots of others who will be frightfully sick at our saying nothing about them. We can imagine, for instance, those two braw Scots, Adam Smith and David Hume, indulging in a quiet grouse during their morning constitutional across the Elysian Fields.

'I see, Davie mon, that ye're no includit in yon buik'

'I am not, Adam, nor yoursel' neither. But I'm no carin', in my opinion the author's but a puir daft body.'

'Ay, he can blether to the fu' about his Johnsons



Two braw Scots

and his Goldsmiths and a' such puir trash, but he hasna' a word to spare for the like o' you and me'

'Hoots, laddie, 'tis no matter, ye ken that yon wee buik is just written for a lassie'

'I ken fine that, Davie, but——'

Gentlemen, say no more We are sorry, but we have no room for you

Poetry at last gets a move on It begins to take notice of Nature Let us look back and forward for a moment The poets of the Classic Age were weak on Nature,

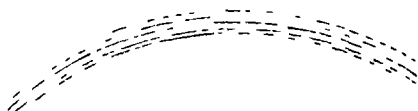


'Egad! A primrose!'



those of the Romantic Age (starting about 1800) regarded her as their long suit. What, for instance, did a primrose by the river's brim mean to Pope, if he ever saw one? Did it give him shivers all down his back and make him long to burst his heroic coup-

lings and twitter like a bird? Not a bit of it. He just said, 'Egad! A primrose! They're early this year,' and walked on and thought no more about the darned thing. Very



Especially in the case of rainbows

different was it with Wordsworth, the great apostle of the Romantic School. Flowers always upset him dreadfully; even the meanest of them, such as the dandelion

or the lesser sneeze-wort, brought him thoughts that would have made him cry if they hadn't, fortunately, lain too deep for tears. He responded like a barometer to every tap of Nature, especially in the case of rainbows, which, as he himself has confided to us, never failed to increase his blood-pressure.



Go to sleep under a beech tree

Well, of course, Rome wasn't run up in a week, and it took a long time for English poets to abandon the traditions of the Classical School and recapture the genuine gurgle. Consequently, between Pope and Wordsworth we find a group of what may be called half-and-halfers, who have advanced some way but are not really quite there. The best known of these is Thomas Gray. You have probably read his *Elegy in a Country Churchyard*—all about the curfew bell and the moulting owl and the shy oyster and the young man who used to go to sleep under a beech tree after brushing the lawn. A marvellous poem, is it not,



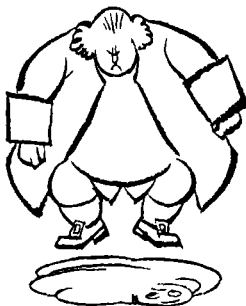
Never had a dog's chance of becoming M.P.'s

Angela? Notice that Mr Gray has scrapped the Heroic Couplet and, though he employs a very polished style, seems really keen on the beauties of the country and full of sympathy for the poor yokels who were so rude that they never had a dog's chance of becoming M P's or writing *Paradise Lost*. In another charming poem he describes the Eton boys merrily playing at ball and bowling their hoops, and says how much better ignorance is than education.



There was one die-hard

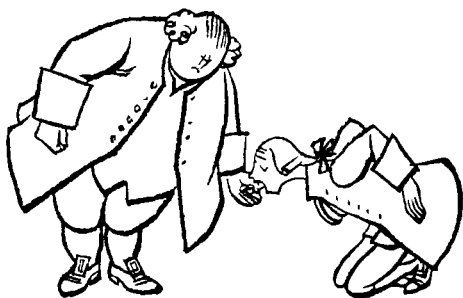
There was one die-hard, however, who strongly objected to the turn poetry was taking and had no use for Gray. We refer to Dr Samuel Johnson. This eminent but misguided lexicographer founded a literary club in London about the middle of the eighteenth century. Here he had an armchair of his own and sat and talked in it once a week for more than twenty years. The other members



Sadder and a flatter man

didn't seem to mind much, for, though gruff in manner and an untidy feeder if asked out to dinner, he was really a kind-hearted old

thing, and everybody liked him. In any case, it would have been no good trying to stop him, because he was built that way, and if you ventured to contradict him he immediately went over you like a steam-roller and you just lay on the carpet till someone slid you out under the door, without bothering to open it, a sadder and a flatter man. That we know more of Samuel Johnson than of any of his contemporaries is due to the unfortunate enthusiasm of a Scot named James Boswell, who was so tame that he would feed out of the Doctor's hand. After taking copious notes for

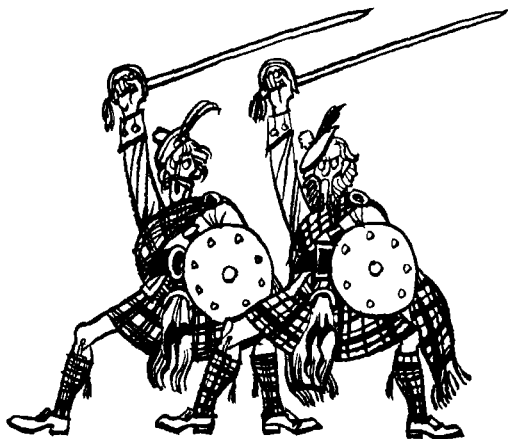


Feed out of the Doctor's hand

several years of everything his patron said and did, he made them into the longest biography ever written. This is still read in abridged editions and is remarkable for the number of times the word 'Sir' occurs.

Dr. Johnson, then, was against the new movement; but it went on, and in the last quarter of the century

there appeared several poets of quite a different type from their predecessors. One of these was William Blake. He is often difficult to understand, because he was what is called a mystic, but some of his poems are the most beautiful things in the world. Another was Robert Burns, in whose honour, it is proudly claimed, enough whisky has been drunk to fill Loch Lomond.



Clansmen of Caledonia

twice over. Year by year 'Burns Night' is still celebrated at the Scottish capital.¹ The ceremony is simple but impressive. As darkness approaches, all the clansmen of Caledonia, with many a stern wild hoot, toot,

¹Edinburgh

and och-ay, gather by torchlight on the slopes of Arthur's Seat ¹ Presently, when the ranks are ranged, comes the sudden harsh squeal of a thousand pipes, and a hush falls on that vast assembly ² For a few moments every man stands silent, tense, expectant, then, at a second signal, he extracts a heavy cylindrical object from the recesses of his kilt and, taking the



Solemnly raises it to his lips

time from the Lord Provost of Edinburgh, solemnly raises it to his lips and pays long and grateful tribute to the Immortal Memory A collection, to which all cheerfully contribute their empty bottles,³ follows in

¹A neighbouring height It is not certainly known who Arthur was, or whether he ever really sat down there, or, if he did, what could have induced him to do so

²Not to be confused with the General Assembly, which meets with a different object

³The subsequent sale of these always realizes a handsome sum.

aid of the Scottish Female Abstiners' League, and at length, after chanting *Auld Lang Syne*, the multitude, with drawn haggises, marches away by zig-zag paths to lowland village and highland glen

We have described this scene to help you to perceive something of the grip which Burns has secured on the affections of our brothers of the North. How are we to account for it? The explanation is easy. In nearly all his poems this son of a ploughshare speaks



Mrs J Anderson

straight to the Scottish human heart. He takes the simplest theme—a bright red highland lass, a mouse capsized in a cornfield, Mrs J Anderson blethering to her man in a cottage—and just makes a song about it which everybody across the Border can understand and go mad over. That is all. To you and ourselves, Angela, poor clods of Saxon soil that we are, the appeal may not be so instantaneous, at least, not in all cases.



Horizontally

There are passages in Burns which are beyond us, no matter how we read them, horizontally, vertically, or diagonally. Yet

somehow even we feel dimly that here is music—

akin perhaps to that of the bag-pipes, but still music—and we pay instinctive homage to the genius of a man who could write such verse—and get away with it.



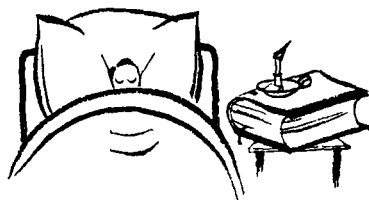
Vertically

Prose writing at this time suffered from an attack of elephantiasis. Dr Johnson was, of course, the champion weight-lifter of English prose. His idea of writing a sentence was to collect an armful of the biggest and heaviest words he could find, Latin ones for choice, and juggle them with methodical cunning into a first-class head-ache. Then there was Edward Gibbon, who wrote *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* in terrific rolling periods a hundred miles long. In these modern days, when nerve-strain is so prevalent, this book should be kept at every bedside, it is universally admitted to be the finest cure for insomnia in the English language. A third writer whom we cannot avoid mentioning was Edmund Burke, who might have been a cabinet minister if he had been a Scotchman, but unluckily he was Irish. He wrote in the hose-pipe style—a concentrated torrent of words that



Diagonally

simply bowled over everybody he was up against, and he was generally up against somebody. But somehow it never seemed to make much difference in the end,



Kept at every bedside

they just staggered to their feet, gave themselves a rub over, and went on their wicked ways

Alongside of these more serious people, however, there were other lighter-handed writers. Richard



Perfect fool in conversation

Sheridan, a prominent M.P. and society pet of George III's reign, produced some amusing prose comedies, and one very good one was written by Oliver Goldsmith, who, though nearly as ugly as Dr Johnson and a perfect fool in conversation, could do almost anything with a pen and an ink-pot. You have no doubt



'By Jove, this is good!'

read that poem of his, *The Deserted Village*, a well-known examination piece. He also wrote a story about the vicar of Wakefield, an old fellow named Dr Primrose, and his amazingly stupid family. Nowadays many people consider the *Vicar of Wakefield* rather a boring book, but at the time it was published it was a new departure and everybody said, 'By Jove, this is good!' Which just shows, Angela, that literature is like everything else—the great thing is to get there first.

This brings us to the novel, which was now coming into fashion. Just a word about it. The earliest prose fiction dealt with the adventures and escapades of wandering rascals, and stories of this kind—picaresque, as they were called—first became popular, appropriately enough, in the reign of Charles II. Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, though quite a good tale, can perhaps hardly be included in this class. A little later, Addison, in his *Coverley Papers*, just managed to avoid



Sent to bed

writing the first English serial, all that was wanted was a plot, which he very cleverly left out. Then came *Robinson Crusoe*, by Daniel Defoe, a real good yarn and practically a novel. At last, about the middle of the eighteenth century, four people, Richardson, Fielding, Smollett and Sterne, produced the genuine article. It is not necessary for you to remember anything about them, Angela, because you will probably never read

them, and if you do you ought to be sent to bed; but you may note if you like that Fielding wrote *Tom Jones* and that Richardson knew more than any mere man should about the intricate workings of the female heart



IX

THE ROMANTIC REVIVAL



IN our last chapter we saw that, from the time of Gray, poetry had begun to kick over the classic traces. During the period we have next to consider, it fairly took the bit between its teeth and bolted. Why, you ask, did it behave thus? To this question there are several answers. We might, for instance, reply that these forty years (1790-1830) witnessed the consummation of tendencies that had been slowly gathering force through the latter part of the eighteenth century, and you might possibly understand what we meant, Angela, or again, you might not. Or we might say that it was a pure fluke, and there would be some truth in this, though we do not recommend it as a statement



Lower orders were fed up

for examination purposes But the best answer to the question, and indeed, to any question that can be asked about literature or history or any mortal thing

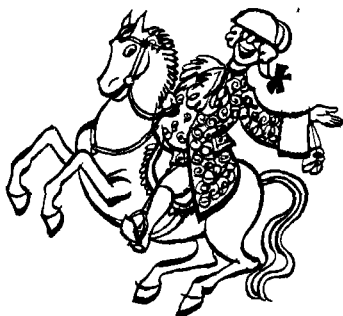


Everything to pay for

at this time, is, the French Revolution The French Revolution will account for anything What was it?

Towards the end of the century, France was badly in need of repair. The lower orders were fed up with having nothing to eat and the middle class with having

everything to pay for, while the nobles just pranced about laughing at the rest of the people and calling



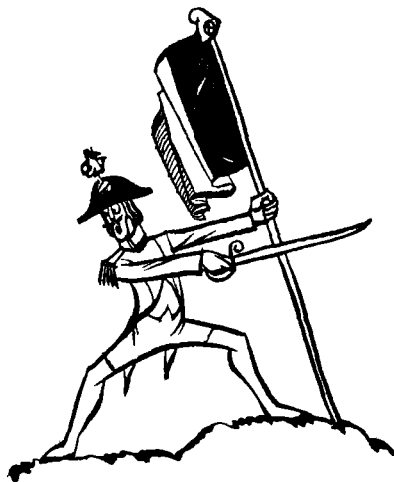
Just pranced about

them *cochons* and *canals* and other unpleasant names. At last the bourgeoisie all got together and invented a new slogan, 'Liberty, Equality and Fraternity,' which meant that everybody ought to be forced to do exactly



Entitled to quarrel with him

as he liked, that everybody was as good as everybody else, and in most cases a great deal better, and that everybody was everybody's brother and therefore



Liberty, Equality, Fraternity

entitled to quarrel with him as much as he pleased. These ideas did not appeal to the king and the nobles, who were conservatives; so the people cut off their heads¹ and bagged all their property. They then dropped

¹Not with axes or choppers, with which, until you had had a lot of practice, you were always liable to make a mess of your first two or three shots, but with an ingenious instrument called the guillotine, where you only had to jerk a rope and it did it at once quite neatly in one, without keeping the noble waiting and wondering what on earth you were playing at

a p c. to each of the other nations advising them to do the same. This alarmed the British Government. 'Why, dash it all,'¹ said Mr. Pitt, the Prime Minister, 'if we



Keen on fighting the French

don't look out it will be our turn next. We'd better go to war with France' So they did that, and this policy

¹The language of the upper and lower classes at this period was regrettably lax. The middle classes, however—e.g., William Wordsworth and Charles Lamb and people like that—were much more restrained. Compare Wordsworth's tribute to a fellow poet in his *Character of the Happy Golfer*:

Who through the conflict makes it still his aim
To swallow back the rising word of shame,
And, should he chance to miss a six-inch putt,
Like Coleridge, merely breathes a mild 'Tut, tut!'

was quite successful, because the war turned out to be a good long one (lasting for twenty-two years with the usual interval at half-time), and the English people got so keen on fighting the French that they never gave any trouble at home till it was all over, and then not much. Of course, we won in the end, that was always an understood thing in any war we consented to go into, and it says a lot for the sporting spirit of the French that they were willing to put up a fight at all, knowing, as they must have done, that they never really had an earthly.

Nevertheless, the French Revolution did exercise a marked influence in England, especially on literary men, many of whom regarded it as the beginning of a



Have a good look at Nature

new era, and its first effect was to bring about an

upheaval in poetry. English poets now decided to dig right down to the roots of things and have a good look at Nature and their souls, etc , and, incidentally, not be hampered any longer by classic models and poetic diction and all the rest of the old gadgets. The originator of the movement—the Romantic Revival, as it is called—was William Wordsworth. It will be well for you, Angela, to learn something of the career of this prolific writer and blameless man.



X
WORDSWORTH



WILLIAM WORDSWORTH, who came of a very respectable family, was, through no fault of his own, born at Cockermouth in the year 1770, and lived on and on and on till 1850, writing poetry nearly all the time from the age of sixteen, except at meals. He was, in fact, one of the greatest and most determined poets who ever sucked a pen-nib, and if we put Homer and Shakespeare at scratch his international handicap stands at about twelve.¹

¹His own estimate, which he was fond of repeating, was 'We are seven', but this is probably rather low

As a boy William studied hard at school, but on going to Cambridge he naturally decided to slack off a bit, so he took up Italian because the grammar was so easy. Having read a good deal of Italian, he thought it would be nice to know a little French, and accordingly went over to France, where with the aid of a charming young lady named Annette he quickly learned to conjugate the verb *aimer* in all its moods



Writing poetry nearly all the time

and tenses. After a while, however, suddenly realizing that he was forgetting all about his career, he caught the Calais-Dover boat back just in time to escape the guillotine and settled in Dorset, the butter county. Here he got to know a person called Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who, though a minister, was also, like himself, a poet, and the two soon became bosom pals.

One day several entirely novel ideas struck William Wordsworth with great force, and, when he had recovered from the blow, he hastened to communicate them to his friend Samuel.

'It seems to me, old chap,' he said, 'that this thing

they call "poetic diction" is pure drivel—too artificial altogether. Look at this line: "Lo! Phoebus leaves Aurora's ruddy bed" What do you make of that?"

'Rotten,' said Samuel.

'Exactly. But it's just on all fours with the sort of bilge nearly everybody has been turning out for the last hundred years. Now I maintain that the language of poetry ought to be the everyday language of ordinary people like—well, not like you and me, because of course we're not ordinary people.'



Young lady named Annette

'No,' agreed Samuel.

'But like everyone else one meets. For instance, what the blighter who wrote that line was really trying to say was "The sun is rising." Well, why not say so straight away?'

Samuel shook his head 'It would be a revolution.'

'Of course it would, and it's just that revolution that you and me—I mean, I and you—are going to start. But simple language isn't everything, not by a long chalk. We must have simple subjects, too, simple subjects with a sob in them, if you take me, something that will bring a good hefty lump into the throat of the great-hearted British Public.'

'God bless it!' murmured Samuel, reverently removing his hat.

'And besides that, Sam, we've got to get right down to Naked Nature with two capital N's and no trimmings Do you follow me?'

'Rainbows and rocks and precipices and ponds and all that—Eh?'

'Yes, pure jam for me. Finally—and this is the main point—we must make the B.P. think that these simple



A sob in them

little themes are really rather deep, and that there's a lot more in them than meets the eye.'

'But——'

'But what?'

'But suppose there isn't?'

'There is,' said William firmly; 'at least, there is in everything *I* write What's the really interesting background to all my poems?'

'I—I can't remember for the moment,' faltered Samuel.

'Why, my soul, you poor snipe. And that's the stuff

to give 'em We've just got to turn our souls inside out so that people can have a good look at them.'



Now what about it?

'Oh, I say, Willie! Really, you know!'

'Well, you can please yourself about yours, but I feel that mine is quite fit for publication and I intend to reveal it for all I'm worth. Now listen to me, Sam. If we can put this over the B P it's going big. Let's publish a little volume together for a start

and share the kudos fifty-fifty. There's that thing of yours you were showing me last night—*The Old Bo'sun*, wasn't it? I like it. It's a bit on the eerie side, but, of course, that's your stunt. We'll put that in for one. Then I've got several poems of my own. Let's see, there's *Goody Blake*, and *Simon Lee*, and *The Idiot Boy*—I needn't run through the whole list. Now what about it?'



Said it was tripe

'I'm with you, Willie,' said Samuel faintly.

And that was the origin of the *Lyrical Ballads*,

destined to bring about, as Wordsworth had predicted, a revolution in English poetry. The book was a dead failure. Hardly anybody would bother to read it, and those who did said it was tripe. But Wordsworth was not to be discouraged. A little later he published a second edition with a preface explaining exactly what poetry ought to be. This preface did the trick. It started everyone arguing about poetry and about

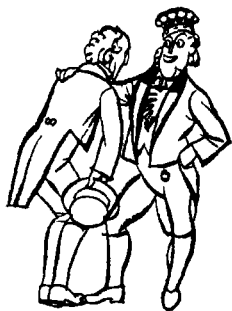


Conversing with old women and sheep and village half-wits

William—whether he was a real poet or merely a bleat in the wilderness. In the end William won.

He was now living at Grasmere in the Lake District, going for long walks in the rain and the thinnest of trousers and often without a hat, conversing with old women and sheep and village half-wits, and studying pond-life and his soul. It was impossible to get away from William; he seemed to be everywhere at once, and all the time he kept on pouring out poetry by the

pailful. This sort of thing, of course, was bound to tell, and presently he became a local institution. Visitors to the Lakes began to follow him about,



An asset to the district

though never so closely as to alarm him. At length he attracted the attention of a neighbouring nobleman. This shrewd and public-spirited peer came to the conclusion that William was an asset to the district, and that with proper backing he would prove a certain winner. So he decided to aid and abet him, and one day sent for

him and asked how he was getting on. William said the poetry was going strong, but there was no money in it.

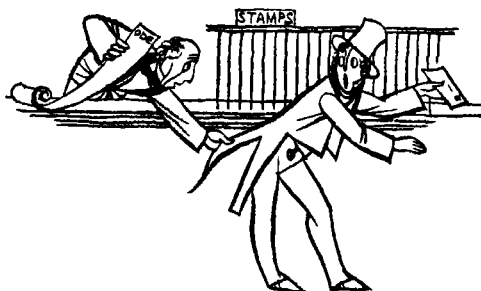
'H'm. We can't afford to lose you, Mr. Wordsworth. I'll see what I can do.'

'Thank you, my lord.'

The nobleman was as good as his word. He procured for the poet a life appointment as Distributor of Stamps for the County of Westmoreland. The job just suited William. It gave him ample leisure and a guaranteed income of £500 a year. It also gave him a regular audience. Few customers managed to escape without listening to *Animal Tranquillity and Decay*, or *Characteristics of a Child Three Years Old*, or whatever the latest happened to be. Yet, curiously enough, the

sale of stamps during William's tenure of the office went steadily up, which shows what a necessity they had become.

So the years wore on. For half a century William



Few customers managed to escape

Wordsworth remained immersed in the Lakes, doing well out of his stamps and writing shoals of poems. In 1843 he accepted the Laureateship and at last left this earthly stage in 1850. Deeply regretted



Immersed in the Lakes

XI
THE ROMANTIC REVIVAL (*continued*)



WORDSWORTH and Coleridge were not the only poets of this period, other well known ones were Byron, Shelley and Keats. Byron was a very moody individual who expressed his contempt for humanity by refusing to wear a collar and tie and by writing a lot of unpleasant poetry about people he didn't like—for instance, Mr Bob Southey (Poet Laureate) and poor old King George III. As a satirist he had a genuine punch, but since he hit everybody more or less indiscriminately, nobody was much the worse. Shelley was interested in social problems and had an ambition to lift the world to higher things. Cabinet ministers, however, though, as persons of

culture, often given to reading a spot of poetry to help them to doze off on a Sunday afternoon, naturally paid no serious attention to the ideas of a mere ink-slinger, while, of course, the ordinary M P, if he ever read him at all, simply couldn't make out what he was driving at. Thus poor Percy never cut any ice with the Men that Really Matter, which was a pity, because his aims, if a trifle unpractical, were good. As a lyric poet



People he didn't like

he would still be picked among the first half-dozen in any representative English side. So would Keats. Keats was less fiery than Shelley and came slower off the pitch, but his easy graceful delivery and perfect command of length made him a real artist. What he was always on the look-out for was beauty, as he very truly remarked, 'A thing of beauty is a sob for ever.' Now England was particularly unbeautiful at the time in which he lived, with towns like Birmingham and Wigan increasing horribly in size, and everyone sweating away in cotton-mills and coal-mines, and never

having a bath, and spending all their spare cash on dog fights and three of gun, miss; so Keats sought his inspiration in the past, and revelled in stained-glass



Never cut any ice with the Men that Really Matter

windows and knights clumping round in armour and fragile maidens kneeling about draughty castles in expensive silk nightgowns, or shedding tears when asked to do a job of work in a foreign country at harvest time. The only drawback about Keats is that if you take too much of him at once you get a sort of feeling as if you had been living on wedding cake and cod-liver oil ever since you were born. But he is all right in small doses.



Increasing horribly

There was an increasing liveliness at this time on the prose front Newspapers like *The Morning Post* and *The Times* (both happily still with us) came into existence, and some famous periodicals, e.g., the *Edinburgh Review*, the *Quarterly* and the *London Magazine*. The *Edinburgh Review* had a habit of regarding literary aspirants in the light of black beetles, and managed to put its foot down on not a few of them, thus performing a notable service to posterity. On the other hand, the growth of magazines certainly encouraged the output of essays, and it was during these years that many of our most notorious essay-writers were rampant.



Knights clumping round



Fragile maidens

Charles Lamb was one of them. He wrote the *Essays of Elia* for the *London Magazine*. He also, with the connivance and help of some of his friends, did much to revive the study of Shakespeare, and was thus partly responsible for the inclusion of that author in modern examination syllabuses, but it is only fair to remember that he tried to make amends for this by composing, together with his sister Mary, a collection of short *Tales from Shakespeare*.

which make it possible to get the hang of most of the plays without wading through the originals ¹



Essay-writers were rampant

Every schoolgirl, Angela, should possess a copy of this invaluable book William Hazlitt and Thomas de Quincey were also at large and wrote essays on every conceivable subject.

An unfortunate thing about the poets and prose-writers we have been mentioning is that they were nearly all people with a decided kink This is, of course, one of the penalties of genius, no absolutely normal person, for instance, can ever be a poet But the fact remains that the literary men of the period were afflicted with an unusually large number of bats in the belfry What was the reason? We cannot say for certain, but, as before, the best answer seems to be the French Revolution In contrast to these, the last two writers whom we shall notice were eminently sane, which is odd, because they were both novelists

Sir Walter Scott, as no doubt you have already heard, wrote the Waverley series of historical novels Exactly how many of these there may be we do not know,



Absolutely normal person

¹This illustrates two of Lamb's salient characteristics—his humanity and his sense of humour

since we have never counted them; but we believe there are people who have read them all from cover to cover—and are still living. Like Scotch whisky, they are an acquired taste. Sir Walter was also a poet, though hardly in the same sense as Wordsworth or Keats, that is, he was not always taking his soul out and wiping it and putting it back again, or sighing for lodgings with a sea view and claret-cup and death and things like that. He just threw off a few



Sir Walter Scott

thousand lines of brisk stuff about some of the more abandoned Scottish Border families, etc., and very good reading they are. Quite different from Scott was Jane Austen, the first, but unhappily not the last, of our great female novelists. She wrote stories about ordinary middle-class people like ourselves, Angela,



and her young ladies compare favourably with the modern flapper. You should get to know these girls.

XII THE VICTORIAN AGE



IT is generally admitted by historians that Queen Victoria was a very good woman, much better, for example, than Mary Queen of Scots or Lady Macbeth; and this quality in the Sovereign had a marked effect not only on the tone of her court, which was eminently nice, but also on the character of society as a whole and more particularly of the middle classes. There never was a time when the middle classes were so respectable as in the reign of Queen Victoria, or when they made

so much money. The aristocracy, of course, except when they were at court, could do pretty well what they liked, and often did, because, after all, if heaven or some prime minister has made you a lord you may as well be one, still, taking them by and large, they were fairly good. As for the labouring classes, they were so enthusiastically engaged in piling up fortunes for the big manufacturers that they, too, remained

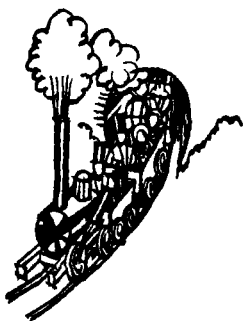


So respectable



Peers in their off moments

quite good for a long time and gave practically no trouble. Thus we may say that, barring some of the peers in their off moments, the English people (and



Railway trains began puffing about

the Scots¹⁾ were extremely well-behaved during the reign of Queen Victoria

Nevertheless, there was a distinct stir beneath the surface of the pond New discoveries, inventions and theories were continually coming to the top Railway trains began puffing about and telegraph poles springing up all over the place; people started wearing

looser trousers and having their teeth out with gas and their legs cut off with chloroform, the spread of education resulted in the establishment of the Oxford and Cambridge boat-race as a national institution, a fungoid growth of public examinations, and an increasing suspicion on the part of women that men were mere worms ²



Great Trek

¹But not the Irish For some reason these people were always worrying the Government for Home Rule and fewer clergymen and meat with their potatoes and other impossible things

²This suspicion seemed to them, oddly enough, to be confirmed by the discovery of a great scientist that one of Adam's grandfathers had started life as a monkey.

All this naturally had a disturbing influence on literature, and we find the new ideas reflected in the work of the more serious writers of both poetry and prose. Two of the latter were T. Carlyle and J. Ruskin.



His descriptions of scenery were wonderful

Carlyle was born in Dumfriesshire (N.B.), but, finding it impossible to extract sufficient sixpences from his fellow countrymen to support him in a literary career, made the Great Trek and settled down in London (S.W.), where his rugged benevolence and advertising

capacity earned him the affectionate nickname of 'The Drage of Chelsea' He wrote so much and in such a



At an unusually early age

curious style—rather like a man very short of breath shouting through a megaphone—that his teaching was often a trifle confusing, but it really boiled down to this, that if people only

worked hard enough and did exactly what Thomas Carlyle told them, things would turn out all right in the end Ruskin was better at grammar than Carlyle, and his prose didn't jump about so much, but he was a very adjectival writer His descriptions of scenery were wonderful and made you see things in Nature that you would never have guessed for yourself His chief hobbies were architecture and the stones of Venice, and his only weakness a partiality for blue ties to match his eyes, which were a deep turquoise Otherwise he was not a dressy man An uplifting soul Of a different type from these two was Thos Bab Macaulay, who didn't bother about trying to uplift people or telling them what they ought and ought not to do, because he knew it was simply no good Having apparently mastered the art of reading before he was born, he was able to start his education at an unusually early age, and by the time he left school he knew more than the sixth-form masters. His speciality was history, in which he was so completely at home that he managed to write nearly a million

words on the reigns of three English kings. He also composed some stupendous essays for the *Edinburgh Review*. Macaulay's style was considered very snappy in the boring forties. As a poet he may be regarded as the forerunner of the Imperial Brass-Band School.

The novel was now going very strong and as time passed its output increased in geometrical progression, if you understand what that means, Angela. In the earlier part of the period its two chief exponents were Chas. Dickens and W. M. Thackeray, both humorists,



Both humorists

who divided society between them, Dickens taking the lower and Thackeray the upper strata. You should also remember the Rev. Chas. Kingsley, who wrote *Westward Ho!* because he was a golfing Christian and couldn't stand Spaniards, the sisters Brontë, a troupe

of three morbid clergyman's daughters who poured out a lot of powerful passion in print, and Robert



Morbid clergyman's daughters

Louis Stevenson, the author of *Treasure Island*, *Kidnapped*, and several other deservedly best sellers

In poetry, though there was a decided drop from the freshness and zip of the Romantic School, the Victorians did quite well, and this is greatly to their credit, because in Britain the age was not really favourable to poets. There was little to stir the deeper passions of men, beer was cheap and the income tax never rose above a shilling in the pound. As a result, poetry became less feverish and more reflective in tone. We shall mention only three bards of the period. The two leading ones were Messrs A. Tennyson and R. Browning, who ran neck and neck for many years. Tennyson was the more successful. He bagged the laureateship in 1850 and, by dint of nestling close up

to the Royal Family, eventually got himself made a peer. In one respect he was particularly smart: if a poem was wanted at short notice—say for a royal marriage or birth or an important funeral—he could always deliver the goods. He was extraordinarily painstaking and nuggeted his verses over and over again to the highest possible polish. This has led to his being called artificial, yet when really moved he could strike the authentic note of lyric passion. *Leaving the Bar*, for instance, is a real gem, and so is the little poem beginning 'Break, break, break,' composed after watching John Roberts, the famous Victorian billiard player, performing at Thurston's. Browning was different, he never bothered about polishing. He would just rip a lump of poetry out of his interior and leave it to cool off as it was with all the jagged ends sticking out, and if people didn't understand it—well, that was a matter of small concern to R. Browning. He had nothing to play for. Tennyson was such a healthy sort of bird that the laureateship was obviously booked up for years, and of course it was absurd to think of two poets being made lords at once; it wasn't as if they were brewers. So he didn't worry, but merely went on writing as the spirit



Made a peer

moved him; and after a while he strolled off to Italy with his wife (a female poet), and so got



Didn't understand it

right away from Tennyson and the court and all that crowd



A school inspector

Contemporary with Tennyson and Browning was Matthew Arnold. It is perhaps rather surprising that this man ever developed poetry, because his father was a schoolmaster and he himself followed the dreadful calling of a school inspector, but genius will sprout from any dust-heap. You should read *The Scholar Gypsy* and *Sohrab and Rustum* and ask

yourself if you like them. If the answer is in the negative, then there is probably no hope for you, Angela, and you had better take up typing and shorthand.

ENVOI

This, Angela, is where we get off We might have uttered a few winged words about the Post-Victorian Age, but caution has prevailed The better, wiser, safer course is—silence Good-bye, dear girl



INDEX

(Compiled to please our publisher. When he said, in his light way, "What about an index?" we swallowed a groan and replied, "All right," because you've simply *got* to humour them. We privily determined, however, to insert only those items which appeared to us to be of outstanding interest and importance. Which is why it is what it is. Never mind. Who wants to read an index, anyway?)

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